

Planning for and Preserving Cultural Resources through National Heritage Areas

To understand and plan for cultural resource conservation through National Heritage Areas, it helps to understand heritage development and heritage tourism. The heritage tourist may typically take a three- or four-day car trip, often as a family. They look for a variety of experiences, including recreation, history, and local culture. They might rent bicycles to explore the new trail along the river, or walk the canal path, and tour a historic restored mill, visit the local historical society museum, select some local crafts to purchase, eat supper at the firehouse barbecue, and dance at a local music festival after supper. In these trips, heritage tourists encounter variety, relaxation, recreation, experiencing something new and different with all their senses, finding something different and authentic, and taking part in an ongoing and thriving community.

How does this result in increased preservation? It encourages preservation because the travelers are looking for authentic, distinctive, and personal history. Visitors want to know that this is “real history” and appreciate hearing it from those who live in the region. When those who live there tell their story to the visitor and under-

stand its significance to the traveler, the story—and the resources—often become more meaningful to the resident, who is encouraged to help in the preservation of those resources that tell the story.

What do the 18 National Heritage Areas preserve? (See box next page.) They all have a theme that is intertwined with their geography: the landscape and development on it tell the story. For example, major early steel mills were developed in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, because three navigable rivers came together there and high quality coal was found in the nearby hills. The early steel mills were conveniently built on the flats along the rivers. As the steel industry grew, the plants needed to be larger, but the bluffs along the rivers prevented their expansion. So the steel industry moved to the area around Chicago where there was plenty of flat land, and access to the Great Lakes. So Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area in Pittsburgh preserves the resources that tell this story, including remnants of abandoned steel mills.

Heritage areas are committed to preserving the local culture, and way of life. Quinebaug-Shetucket Heritage Area, in eastern Connecticut and southeastern Massachusetts, is a collection of charming small mill towns along the Quinebaug and Shetucket rivers, farm lands, and small enterprises, all in a beautiful rolling countryside. Residents fear that the growth of Boston will overtake their way of life and alter their historic landscapes with new developments, and they are working to preserve those landscapes. The Hudson River Heritage Area intends to preserve the rural countryside along the Hudson River and make it more accessible with trails following the river, including a small boat trail within the river. An expected result of the heritage area's greater accessibility and increased visibility, is more citizens getting involved in preservation of the river.

Scene at Outdoor Heritage 2000, a festival celebrating the natural and cultural heritage of the Path of Progress heritage area of southwestern Pennsylvania. Courtesy Allegheny Heritage Development Corporation.



Designated National Heritage Areas

(As of March 2000)

Year Designated	National Heritage Area	State(s)
1984	Illinois & Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor	IL
1986	John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor	MA & RI
1988	Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Corridor	PA
1988	Southwestern Pennsylvania Heritage Route (Path of Progress)	PA
1994	Cane River National Heritage Area	LA
1994	Quinebaug & Shetucket Rivers Valley National Heritage Corridor	CT & MA
1996	Cache La Poudre River Corridor	CO
1996	America's Agricultural Heritage Partnership	IA
1996	Augusta Canal National Heritage Area	GA
1996	Essex National Heritage Area	MA
1996	Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area	NY
1996	National Coal Heritage Area	WV
1996	Ohio & Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor	OH
1996	Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area	PA
1996	Shenandoah Valley Battlefields National Historic District	VA
1996	South Carolina National Heritage Corridor	SC
1996	Tennessee Civil War Heritage Area	TN
1998	Automobile National Heritage Area	MI

Heritage areas make their landscapes more accessible to visitors, as well as to residents. The Ohio and Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor will, when restored, link Akron and Cleveland with communities in between, and with the Cuyahoga National Recreation Area in the middle. Residents will be able to walk or bicycle out into the country from their back yard. This new access is expected to inspire more residents to get involved in the preservation of the canal towpath.

How does heritage preservation work for specific resources? It is, at its best, local, personal, and sustainable. New visitors to an area can make it feasible to rent rooms in a historic home, which eases the burden of maintaining the structure. Farm-stay visitors can help out a small farm owner both by paying for the farm stay and perhaps by being inspired to help out with the farm work. Unique local crafts, like an airplane made from recycled Mountain Dew cans, could provide enough extra income to enable someone to continue to live in their mountain cabin. If a heritage area holds annual music festivals, some residents will be inspired to learn traditional music so they can compete and participate in the coming year's music festival.

How does a heritage area begin? Some have begun with a good idea one individual shared with a friend over a kitchen table; then they

brought in more friends; next they moved to the community center for meetings and then on to regional meetings. It is a grassroots program. A significant image for heritage areas is a big round table where folks who have not traditionally worked together, and perhaps have never even met, begin to meet on a regular basis and figure out how to make their dream come true.

It is this dream, this vision, and its early development that is special about heritage areas. This is also what makes heritage area planning different from other planning efforts. It is a collage of good ideas fused into a vision of what the residents in a region want their future to be, and a collage of thinking about how to get there. An effective strategy for heritage planning is giving disposable cameras to 50 residents and asking them to photograph what they like about their community and want to preserve, and what they don't like and want to reduce, eliminate, or restrict. When all the photographs are developed, the group together sorts the pictures into "good" and "bad" and displays them on the wall. Solutions begin to become evident, and the appropriate people for implementing those changes begin to think about how to make those changes. The best heritage development comes from the heart—from loving one's community, and wanting to make it an even better place to

live. When the changes begin to happen, the energy to continue on grows even deeper.

Planning heritage development is best when it is based on this kind of beginning. But challenges are legion. Many of the National Heritage Areas are vast—one is the entire state of Tennessee and another is one quarter of the state of South Carolina. Pulling together the many action pieces needed to create the vision is challenge enough. In addition, all of the heritage areas have many partner organizations committed to the vision. Getting agreement among all the partners is long and slow. Furthermore, since all heritage area work is dependent on partners, to some extent the priorities are developed from opportunities—who has funding and other resources this year to begin to make their project work. It is tricky to set priorities and balance them with what is feasible. Because of this, developing management plans for heritage areas can be especially challenging. Because what is feasible will change, it is particularly challenging to address environmental compliance in heritage area plans.

For the National Park Service (NPS), work with heritage areas is especially challenging to combine the interests of an organization dedicated to preservation in perpetuity with the interests of a heritage area, where priorities may have to change from year to year. The NPS is also challenged by the focus on economic development that is a part of all heritage area development. If heritage area supporters feel the need to show quick economic benefit to the region, they may pay less attention to resource preservation. The NPS is also challenged by the philosophy and reality that all heritage areas are unique, yet all want to be treated as a group by the Park Service.

National Heritage Areas are designated by Congress, and legislation is pending to establish

seven additional heritage areas. This legislation always requires the development of a heritage management plan, although there are no agreed-upon standards for such plans. The NPS supports National Heritage Areas with funding, training, technical assistance, and recognition for community efforts. Each is provided a web presence on the NPS heritage area web site <www.ncrc.nps.gov/heritage>, and each heritage area's web page is linked to other web pages that have been locally created.

The NPS has a policy for the planning that is required to be completed before Congress creates a new heritage area. This policy was presented to the House of Representatives on October 26, 1999, in response to a bill that would establish a program of heritage areas. That legislation has not been enacted, but the testimony stands as National Park Service policy. This policy includes the following definition for a National Heritage Area:

A 'National Heritage Area' is a place designated by Congress where natural, cultural, historic and scenic resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally distinctive landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography. These patterns make National Heritage Areas representative of the national experience through the physical features that remain and the traditions that have evolved in them. Continued use of National Heritage Areas by people whose traditions helped to shape the landscapes enhances their significance.

In the opinion of the NPS there are four critical steps that need to be taken and documented prior to the Congress designating a heritage area. These stages are:

- public involvement in the suitability/feasibility study;
- completion of a suitability/feasibility study;
- demonstration of widespread public support among heritage area residents for the proposed designation;
- commitment to the proposal from the appropriate players which may include governments, industry, and private, non-profit organizations, in addition to the local citizenry.

A suitability and feasibility study should include a number of components that are helpful for public review, based on our experience with heritage areas previously designated by Congress. Experience has also shown how important it is to complete the suitability and feasibility study before a heritage area is designated. The most

The restored Slater Mill, John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor. NPS photo.



Recreation in the South Carolina National Heritage Corridor.
 Courtesy Heritage Tourism Development Office, South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism.



helpful components of a suitability and feasibility study include analysis and documentation that

- an area has an assemblage of natural, historic, or cultural resources that together represent distinctive aspects of American heritage worthy of recognition, conservation, interpretation, and continuing use, and are best managed as such an assemblage through partnerships among public and private entities, and by combining diverse and sometimes noncontiguous resources and active communities;
- reflects traditions, customs, beliefs, and folklife that are a valuable part of the national story;
- provides outstanding opportunities to conserve natural, cultural, historic, and/or scenic features;
- provides outstanding recreational and educational opportunities;
- the resources important to the identified theme or themes of the area retain a degree of integrity capable of supporting interpretation;
- residents, business interests, non-profit organizations, and governments within the proposed area are involved in the planning, have developed a conceptual financial plan that outlines the roles for all participants including the federal government, and have demonstrated support for designation of the area;
- the proposed management entity and units of government supporting the designation are

- willing to commit to working in partnership to develop the heritage area;
- the proposal is consistent with continued economic activity in the area;
- a conceptual boundary map is supported by the public; and
- the management entity proposed to plan and implement the project is described.

When an area has been studied and can satisfy these criteria, only then should the Congress act on designation.

Once a heritage area is designated, groups in the heritage area should take on the task of developing a heritage management plan for how they will achieve the tasks set out in the feasibility study, which included identification of important resources and themes that represent the community's heritage. The plan must be developed in a timely manner to retain the interest of the community and the momentum that began during the feasibility study phase of the process. The primary focus of the plan should be resource conservation. The plan should provide a blueprint for action by all segments of the community that supports the vision laid out for the area.

The challenges in heritage area work are large, but so are the potential benefits. The results of a heritage area are improved quality of life for residents, measurable economic benefits, and reinvestment into the community. Much of this is, however, difficult to measure and document. The NPS and the Alliance of National Heritage Areas are developing methods for consistently measuring and reporting these benefits for all 18 National Heritage Areas. Heritage area activities are new and evolving, and include all the twists and turns that accompany any new adventure. Heritage areas do promise, however, a new way of preserving resources so vast that a national park unit is not feasible, and they also promise the results of thousands of hands and hearts of community residents put to preserving their landscape, their resources, and their way of life.

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